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THE WALDENSES

"The Israel of the Alps"

BY

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SONNET

* On the Late Massacre in Piedmont

Avenge, O Lord! thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;
Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old,
When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones,
Forget not: in thy book record their groans
Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold
Slain by the bloody Piedmontese that rolled
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway
The triple tyrant; that from these may grow
A hundredfold, who having learned thy way
Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

—*John Milton.*

* Probably written in 1655. Sir Isaac Newton observes: "This prayer, in behalf of the persecuted Protestants, was not entirely without effect. For Cromwell exerted himself in their favour, and his behaviour in this whole transaction is greatly to his honour, even as it is related by an historian, who was far from being partial to his memory. 'Nor would the Protector be backward in such a work, which might give the world a particular opinion of his piety and zeal for the Protestant religion, but he proclaimed a solemn fast, and caused large contributions to be gathered for them throughout the Kingdom of England and Wales. Nor did he rest here, but sent his agents to the Duke of Savoy, a prince with whom he had no correspondence or commerce, and the next year so engaged the Cardinal of France, and even terrified the Pope himself, without so much as doing any favour to the English Roman Catholics, that that Duke thought it necessary to restore all that he had taken from them, and renewed all those privileges they had formerly enjoyed —so great was the terror of his name; nothing being more usual than his saying that his ships in the Mediterranean should visit Civita Vecchia, and the sound of his cannon should be heard in Rome.' See Echard, vol. 2."

THE WALDENSES

"The Israel of the Alps"

There is perhaps no greater or more important work in Europe laid upon the Church of Christ than the evangelization of Italy, that beautiful and classic land of Dante, of Raphael and of Michael Angelo. The removal of the shackles of superstition from the people of Italy, and their emancipation from spiritual slavery "into the glorious liberty of the children of God" is a matter of the deepest importance to all concerned; to the Church, upon whom the task is laid; to the Italian people, for whom this great deliverance is to be wrought, and for all Europe and the world at large, not only spiritually, but also materially, socially, politically, commercialy, industrially, financially.

In His good providence God has furnished the messenger for this great work—the Waldensian Church. Lack of space forbids any attempt to give more than an outline of her heroic and blood-stained history. Suffice it to say that here is a native church, which has occupied a few valleys in Piedmont, in Northern Italy, adjacent to the boundaries of France, from the most ancient times; indeed it is believed by many scholars, from the time of the apostles themselves. The road from Rome into Gaul and Spain led through these valleys, and it is believed that some of the apostles and early disciples of Christianity planted the gospel

here by their preaching and work, while on their journeys along this road. It is also believed that some of those Christians who were driven out of Rome by the persecutions of Nero fled to this remote district for refuge, and that thus this ancient Church had its beginning. At any rate, the Waldensian Church has always laid claim to the greatest antiquity. One of their most noted pastors, Henri Arnaud, who led their "glorious return" in 1689, after they had been banished from their valleys for their evangelical faith, says of them in the preface to his book "Glorious Recovery by the Waldenses of their Valleys": "Neither has their Church ever been reformed, whence arises its title of *Evangelic*. The Waldenses are in fact descended from those refugees from Italy who, after St. Paul had there preached the gospel, abandoned their beautiful country and fled, like the woman mentioned in the Apocalypse, to these wild mountains, where they have to this day handed down the gospel from father to son, in the same purity and simplicity as it was preached by St. Paul." In a petition presented to their sovereign, Philibert Emmanuel, Duke of Savoy and Prince of Piedmont, in the year 1559, they make this statement: "We likewise beseech your Royal Highness to consider, that this religion which we profess is not only ours, nor hath it been invented by men of late years, as is falsely reported, but it was the religion of our fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers, and other yet more ancient predecessors of ours, and of the blessed martyrs, confessors, prophets, and apostles, and if any can prove to the contrary, we are ready to subscribe, and yield thereunto."

The Waldensian Church has always been evangelical, following closely to the pattern of the primitive Church, as set forth in the New Testament. By God's hand she was delivered from corruption, so that when the Reformation broke throughout Europe, Luther and the other Reformers were astonished to find among this peculiar people a Church which had for ages held and taught that body of truth which was to them such a new and rich discovery.

At one time there were as many as 40,000 Waldensians in the valleys of Piedmont and their immediate neighborhood. Prior to the Reformation their missionaries, often disguised as peddlers, traversed all parts of Italy. It has been said that at one time their missionaries could travel from Cologne to Florence and lodge in the houses of brethren every night. They had 6,000 followers in Venice and as many in Genoa, besides many more in other places.

They were subjected to many persecutions from the Church of Rome. From the year 1485 until the Edict of Emancipation, issued by King Charles Albert on February 17, 1848, they were under almost constant persecution, although the sword, the fagot and the stake had largely ceased to be used as instruments for their destruction after the year 1730. For considerably more than 225 years, however, they were constantly subjected to fire and sword. At the outbreak of what is known as their fourth great persecution by Louis XIV of France, in 1685, their number had been reduced to 15,000. At the end of another year their valleys were deso-

lated; 6,000 had been imprisoned, thousands more were slain with the sword, and 2,000 children were torn from their parents and immured in popish institutions. They were then banished from their native valleys and sent to Geneva. All that remained after this fearful period to reach the historic city of Calvin were 2,659—a little over one-sixth of their number one year before!

Henri Arnaud, one of their pastors and their devoted leader, was soon inspired by God to lead them back to the valleys from which they had been driven, and after many remarkable adventures and experiences he reached their native valleys in 1689, with a band of 800 devoted men, who fell upon their foes and swept all before them; they drove their persecutors from their homes, and themselves reoccupied them.

This ancient Church, whose history is written in blood, still lives. The Word of God is no longer bound. God has broken the bands of wicked men and destroyed the power of a corrupt Church to harm them. There are once more about 20,000 inhabitants in the Waldensian Valleys, now peaceful and happy.

They have also about twenty groups of settlers of various sizes in Uruguay and Argentina, with eight regularly organized churches and a college. In the United States they have three agricultural settlements; one at Valdese, N. C., with fifty-six families, and an organized church with an imposing building; a smaller one near Gainesville, Texas, also with an organized congregation and a building, and a third, near Monett, Mo., with twenty-five families

and a vigorous church. Smaller settlements are also located at Texarkana, Ark., Provo City, Utah, and Santa Ana, Cal. There is also a small group of Waldensian families located near Ottawa, Canada, and there are about five hundred native Waldenses in Greater New York who have organized themselves into a body called "The Waldensian Union," which holds regular religious services.

The home Church is seeking to meet her great opportunity, for all Italy now enjoys civil and religious liberty, and the gospel can be proclaimed by any person, society, Church or other organization throughout Italy under the protection of just and equal laws.

Italy needs the gospel. She has largely cast off the dominion of the Church of Rome, but she has as yet made no decided choice as to what she will have in its place. Which will she choose: the gospel or infidelity? The answer to this vital question depends largely upon the Church of Christ. If she presses through the open door of opportunity now before her, she can occupy the land, but if she fails to do so, it may ere long be closed in her face for years to come.

The Italian people as a whole are indifferent to the Roman Church. Vast multitudes still desire baptism, marriage, extreme unction and burial at her hands, but they are otherwise indifferent to her, and her clergy are discredited in the eyes of the people. They know not where to look for anything better, and skepticism and infidelity largely prevail. Unless this is met by the presentation of a pure gospel, Italy's outlook is gloomy indeed. As said

before, the answer to this question depends largely upon the Church of Christ. As a member of that Church what part do *you* propose to take in the great work of helping her to make the right choice and to become wise unto salvation?

The Methodists and Southern Baptists have missions in Italy, but the rest of the Protestant bodies have recognized in the Waldensian Church a divinely chosen instrument for the evangelization of that land, and they have therefore left this field to her, and have not established missions of their own.

For many years, however, American Evangelical Christians of every other name have been deeply interested in "The Israel of the Alps" and her zealous labors to spread the Gospel throughout her beloved Italy.

Waldensian Aid Societies were accordingly organized in a number of American cities, with the object of providing financial assistance for this ancient Church, to enable her to carry on her missionary work. These societies finally became so numerous and the field of their activities so broadened, that the need of a national organization became apparent and in the year 1906 the American Waldensian Aid Society was incorporated, with headquarters in the city of New York. Since that time a large number of the older local societies have affiliated themselves with the new national organization as branch societies and many new branch societies have been formed.

One of the most important and interesting features of the Waldensian Missions is their educational work.

In southern Italy and Sicily, in the districts which give the largest contingent to emigrants, the Waldenses have flourishing day and evening schools, which are attended by thousands of children and adults, respectively. These schools are situated in Rio Marino (the Island of Elba), Forano, Falerna, Salle, Vittoria, Pachino, Grotte, Riesi, Palermo and other places, and are maintained at a phenomenally low expense. For example, the school at Grotte with five hundred children and five teachers costs only $750 a year. In the north of Italy the best Waldensian schools are to be found in Florence, Leghorn, San Remo and Siena. All these school buildings are used also for the evening and Sabbath schools, and thus serve a triple purpose. As an economic problem, the education of these people in their own land is well worth the consideration of the people of America. Mr. W. S. Munroe, of the State Normal School at Montclair, New Jersey, who was sent by the United States Government to report on educational conditions in Italy, says: "The Waldensian schools are now the best one finds in Italy, and the percentage of illiteracy is lower in the Waldensian valleys than in any other part of the kingdom. With the very limited funds at their disposal, one marvels that they could accomplish so much and do their work so well. Their teachers are the best trained that I have found in Italy, and their methods of instruction are in line with the most progressive countries in Northwestern Europe."

Philanthropic institutions have been founded in many cities, including four hospitals, five homes for boys and girls, one refuge for incurables and two homes for aged people.

The full results of the work of the Waldenses can not be known unless we take into account its effect in many other countries to which converts of the mission are constantly emigrating.

This is especially true of the United States. There are at the present time about three millions of Italians in this country. There are now about three hundred and fifty Italian Protestant churches and missions in the United States and Canada, having an aggregate Protestant population of about twenty thousand.

Of the above three hundred and fifty churches, **about one hundred and twenty-five have been started by persons who have been converted in the Waldensian missions throughout Italy before they emigrated to this country!**

From the membership of a single mission station in Sicily, Grotte, **seven** Italian Protestant churches have been established **in the United States,** while an **eighth** is being organized in New York City at the time of writing!

To appreciate these facts, it should be borne in mind that the population of Italy is **thirty-four millions,** of whom **sixty-five thousand are Protestants,** or **less than two-tenths of one per cent.** These figures for Protestantism include a very considerable foreign population made up largely of English, Americans, Germans, etc. It will therefore be seen that while the Protestant population of Italy, including foreigners, is less than two-tenths of one per cent. of the whole, the Protestants in the Italian population of the United States, all of whom are Italians and their children, is **five-tenths** of one per

cent., or **more than two and one-half times the percentage of Protestants in Italy,** and that, under God, **this has been brought about largely through the missionary efforts of the Waldensian Church in Italy.**

This curious and interesting fact has for the many good people who prefer to emphasize home work in their efforts and gifts, the suggestion that much home missionary work among the Italians in the United States can be done **more effectively and economically** in Italy, by evangelizing as many Italians as possible before they come here.

So many advantages accruing to the cause of the evangelization of Italians in the United States, from the Waldensian Missionary Work in Italy, have been discovered in this country that a new department was opened by the American Waldensian Aid Society several years ago as **a Bureau to care for the Religious Welfare of the Italian Protestant Immigrant and Emigrant.** This Bureau is in charge of Reverend Professor Alberto Clot, for a number of years Delegate of the Waldensian Synod to the Christian Churches of America, with headquarters in New York City, and two colporteurs located at the two great seaports of Italian Emigration—Genoa and Naples, where the scriptures, religious literature and a Guide, prepared by the Director, containing information regarding the history of the United States, the duties and requirements of good citizenship, together with directions for travel that will assist the emigrants to reach their destinations at points distant from their ports of debarkation in the United States, are sold or distributed.

This course has been adopted because it has been deemed wiser to make distribution of literature at the port of embarkation, because the emigrant can have leisure during the voyage over to read what has been given to him, whereas upon arrival he is distracted by the excitement incident to landing, and by his strange surroundings, and has little time, if any, to read at all.

This historic Church which has lived in the furnace of trial for so many centuries in the past is undergoing another test in the times in which we live. The participation of Italy in the great war has entailed new tasks and responsibilities upon the Waldenses. There are now about 4,000 men from the Valleys and the Missions throughout Italy in the army, of whom about 300 are officers, including a Major General of Artillery—a man of fine character, who does not hesitate to distribute tracts and gospels among his men—a number of Colonels, etc. Most if not all, of these men are *Alpini,* the world famous Alpine troops of Italy, whose exploits in the Austrian Alps have proved them worthy descendants of their heroic ancestors.

The Italian Government has shown its appreciation of the worth of these soldiers, and its liberality, by appointing three Waldensian pastors as chaplains in the army, with the rank of Captain. Sig. Bosio, recently in this country as a Delegate from the Waldensian Synod, is chaplain for the Fourth Italian Army. Another is chaplain for the Second Army, while the last is chaplain for the Third Regiment of *Alpini.*

The war has worked havoc with the finances of

the Waldensian Church. Immediately upon its outbreak it cut off the support previously received from all the other countries of Europe, involving a loss of $50,000 of income. In addition to this, the entrance of Italy into the war caused the absorption of the resources of the country for military purposes, so that the support of the home land was also seriously affected. Notwithstanding all of these adverse circumstances, by the voluntary reduction of salaries throughout the entire Church and mission field, and by the dismissal of about a dozen evangelists and helpers, the work has been so far maintained without vital loss or serious diminution. **Not one mission or station has been abandoned.** Devoted men and women are remaining at their post at the greatest sacrifice and under heavy deprivation, that the gospel work may go on.

Not only has the old work been maintained, but a new work has also been undertaken, in spite of the difficulties involved in such a step. It is a work rendered most necessary by the exigencies of the moment. Reading and writing rooms for the soldiers and sailors of the Italian army and navy have been opened at all of the principal centers at which troops are gathered—at Turin, Milan, Verona, Venice, Bari and Tarento—the last two principally for sailors and marines.

These reading rooms were opened with the approval of the military authorities. In some places the general in command of the division attended the opening, or has since visited the rooms. In other places notices of the opening of such rooms were posted in the various barracks in the vicinity.

These rooms have proved a great success. They are always filled, when the men are off duty. Hundreds and thousands of men visit them. They are supplied with both religious and secular reading—books, magazines, papers, etc.—and with writing materials and facilities for using them.

The present financial arrangement is, of course, only a temporary expedient. The maintenance of the old work, and the undertaking of this new work described above, besides the distribution of gospels and tracts among the soldiers and sailors, and other religious work in the military camps and at the front, which can only be referred to here, can not be kept on its present basis without the receipt of additional help in the immediate future.

An appeal has therefore been made by Bishop Greer, President of the American Waldensian Aid Society, for a special fund of $50,000 to supplement the regular gifts of the Society for the relief of the situation caused by the war.

If Christian people could realize the importance and value of the present opportunity, there would be no difficulty in raising this sum. The war has marvelously quickened the spiritual life of the Waldensian Church and has increased its opportunity for usefulness amongst the Italian army and people beyond our power to estimate.

The Waldensian Church is rich in all spiritual graces but poor in the things of this world. She nevertheless has always done more than her share in giving of her scanty means and limited resources for the evangelization of her country, and her countrymen in other lands.

Dear Christian reader, is not this historic little Church a fruitful branch of the vine of Christ? Does she not have a strong claim for your support? Has she not a right to ask your prayers on her behalf, that the Lord of the harvest may send forth laborers into His harvest in Italy, and that He may move the hearts of His children to provide the material and financial means for the support of this great work?

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